

Article

## Welfare State Supporter and Civil Society Activist: Church of Sweden in the “Refugee Crisis” 2015

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### Abstract

2015 was a year of an unprecedented migration from the Middle East to Europe. Sweden received almost 163,000 asylum applications. The civil society, including the former state church, took a notable responsibility. In a situation where the welfare systems are increasingly strained, and both the welfare state and the majority church are re-regulated, we ask: how does this play out in local contexts? This article reports from a theological action research project within a local parish in the Church of Sweden. The Lutheran church has from year 2000 changed its role to an independent faith denomination. The study describes the situation when the local authority and the parish together run temporary accommodation for young asylum seekers. For the local authority the choice of the church as a collaborator was a strategic choice. For the local parish this occasion verified the mission of the church. Confirming its former role as carrier of societal beliefs and values the Church of Sweden supports the welfare state. At the same time, the church explores a new role as a faith denomination and part of the civil society.

### Keywords

action research; Church of Sweden; civil society; diaconal work; parish; refugee; welfare state

### Issue

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### 1. Introduction

A photograph of a priest and other church staffers laying out a large number of mattresses in the parish youth centre became widely spread on Facebook. A plea to the residents of Mölndal to donate articles of clothing resulted in a massive response, such that the hundreds and hundreds of donated boxes could not physically fit into the parish facilities. At the same time, the parish deacon and volunteers continued their regularly scheduled visit to the detention centre of the Swedish Migration Agency facility, which houses individuals awaiting deportation.

This article reports from a theological action research project with the Church of Sweden in Mölndal, as a case study of the course of events during the second half of

2015. The aim of the project was to stimulate a process of learning and generate theological knowledge by systematically reflecting on experiences from the process connected to the transit centre for refugees. In this article, we take the results from the action research project as our point of departure for raising further questions concerning church and welfare. The period studied was, from the perspective of the local municipality, a time of exhausted welfare.

2015 was a year of an unprecedented migration from the Middle East to Europe. At a manifestation in support of refugees, the Swedish prime minister spoke and said: “My Europe does not build walls” (Bolling, 2015). But the very next month the Minister for Foreign Affairs relayed in an interview the worry that “most people do

not think we can sustain a system where some 190,000 people arrive every year, in the long run our system will break down" (Stenberg, 2015). In November, the government felt compelled to reintroduce internal border controls "since the current situation poses a severe challenge to critical societal functions" (Regeringskansliet, 2015). Subsequent decisions to restrict the possibility of being granted asylum were justified with reference to the need to create "breathing space" by reducing the number of claimants. Actors in civil society, including the archbishop, voiced criticism (Svenska kyrkan, 2015).

In 2015, Sweden received almost 163,000 asylum applications. The civil society shouldered a large portion of the responsibility for receiving these refugees (MUCF, 2016). The number of asylum seekers in Sweden fell soon after the late autumn's peak. This was mainly caused by tighter border controls, both between Turkey and Greece and within Europe.

### 1.1. Research Questions

The Lutheran church in Sweden has had, both through its Christian heritage and through its historical intertwining with the state, a responsibility for social care. This responsibility has taken different forms over time, in relation to the development of public care. This study traces the changing role of the Swedish Lutheran Church through the deregulation of the state sector and the increased demands on civil society, of which the church is now a part. Civil society is here defined as an intermediate associational realm between state and family, populated by autonomous organisations (Herbert, 2013). As the state is reformed, and thus the relationship between church and state is transformed, we ask: how does this play out in local contexts, in a situation where the welfare society is increasingly strained? To be more specific, which role do local churches play in relation to the welfare society, as actors in civil society, and in relation to the church's own mission?

## 2. De-Regulation of Church and Welfare Institutions

Ever since the 16th century reformation, the Swedish monarch has been the head of the Swedish Lutheran Church. Lutheran doctrine became state religion. During the 19th century, the union between church and state began to crumble. The emergence of liberal political ideologies and the need for constitutional and administrative development shifted the burden of responsibility for healthcare and education in 19th and 20th century Sweden. This could be justified theologically through the Lutheran two-realm doctrine.

Through the realm of the world and the law, God regulates society and maintains his creation. Through the realm of the Christian community, God grants salvation and restores the broken relation to humanity. This is God's twofold way of ruling the world. Behind

what the Swedish theologian Thomas Ekstrand (2011) calls a "quietist-passive model" is a view that the church should "leave the care of politics to the worldly kingdom" (Ekstrand, 2011, p. 125).

In the year 1862, local bureaucracy changed, shifting the responsibility for poor relief from the church to secular local authorities. In the early 20th century, the responsibility for education was also transferred from church to municipality. The Swedish welfare state expanded rapidly in the decades after the Second World War. During the 1980s criticism arose against an overly centralised state and ineffective welfare systems. Deregulations and market solutions gradually created a re-regulated public sector, including a deregulation of the Lutheran state church. Despite this deregulation, the state has had explicit expectation of churches and other faith-based communities, as expressed in this official government report:

By giving people spiritual support, inspire people to increase their ethical awareness and by efficiently solving social problems faith-based communities can add to the harmony of our democratic society. (SOU, 1997, p. 27).

In the year 2000, the relation between state and church changed. A new kind of legal entity, the faith-based community, was created. The relation between state and the Lutheran church was deregulated (or rather *re*regulated) when the Parliament passed a new regulatory framework for the Church of Sweden that specifies certain criteria (i.e., that it covers the entire nation). The internal church constitution is regulated by the democratically elected Church Assembly.

Through changes in the legal framework regarding public procurement in 1992 (Blomqvist, 2004), and later reforms emphasising the freedom of citizens to choose different providers of public services a wide range of previously public services (e.g., childcare, schools and healthcare) could be operated as private or non-profit entities. This created a market for competition. The underlying funding has, however, remained public. The term "welfare pluralism" (Beresford & Croft, 1983) refers to a reduction of the role of the state within social policy and that care can be procured from different market actors: public, private, non-profit and informal. Leading politicians have wanted to open up the welfare sector for more actors (Johansson, 2011). Some authors have called this a renegotiation of the welfare contract (Wijkström, 2012).

Private "for-profit" corporations have expanded rapidly in the welfare sector since the 1990s. There has not been an equal expansion concerning non-profit actors (Lundström & Wijkström, 2012). The same goes for the Church of Sweden, whose externally financed activities have primarily taken place in preschools (SKU, 2009).<sup>1</sup> Since 2012, the Church of Sweden has had the possibility to act in a for-profit capacity in activities re-

<sup>1</sup> Estimates place the number of pre-schools at around 100.

lated to its core function (Edqvist, Friedner, Lundqvist, & Tibbling, 2014). This has had marginal effects.

The Lutheran Church of Sweden is still a majority church when seen nationally and therefore also the largest civil society actor. Almost six million people, or 59% of the population, are still members of the church (Svenska kyrkan, 2018). The primary social work (led by deacons) is financed through membership fees. In the 1336 parishes there are 20,000 church employees, of amongst which around 1100 are deacons, and approximately 30,000 volunteers. Altogether, the transformation of Welfare state and State church can, very condensed, be described as in Figure 1.

### 3. Research Overview: The Role of Majority Churches in Welfare Systems

A study of the role of majority churches in welfare systems describes how government institutions and majority churches maintain societal values, largely with Christian roots (Pettersson, 2011). However, this takes different forms in different contexts. Where post-WW2 Germany chose to engage church organizations with public funds to provide societal care, the role of the Swedish church is described as more limited: “an active supporter” of a strong welfare state (Pettersson, 2011, p. 18). This can be contrasted with the Greek-Orthodox church in Greece and the Catholic Church in Italy, which emphasised the role of the family as the primary agent in providing social care. This difference is seen in, amongst other things, the design of the systems of social security and the role of women in informal care. The tendency to place a greater burden of care on women is, not surprisingly, also reflected in the churches themselves (Edgardh, 2011).

Majority churches tend to be institutions that bind together religious, national and cultural identities. As religious institutions, they provide rituals for all phases of life and are, through their historical role, bearers of a cultural legacy. Majority churches therefore have a variety of links to many parts of society, “an invisible infrastructure” (Pettersson, 2011, p. 23). Representatives of majority churches are often seen as natural partners of government institutions, and are perceived as less controversial than representatives of minority denominations. Therefore, majority churches are often seen as representing religion in general.

The ideological positions of majority churches can in many, but by no means in all, cases be congruent with dominant societal opinions. This is a question of legitimacy. Interview studies show that there is an expectation on churches that they maintain and propagate val-

ues regarding care, trust and the sanctity of human life (Bäckström, Edgardh Beckman, & Pettersson, 2004).

A parish with a well-established network of local connections can use its “social capital” together with its meeting spaces, volunteers and local officials, as a useful asset concerning matters of migration and integration. (Furbey, Dinham, Farnell, Finneron, & Wilkinson, 2003). Local parishes often find themselves better prepared than other social actors to utilize religious symbolic capital to play an integrative role (Furbey et al., 2003). When Pessi, Angell and Pettersson (2009) studied majority churches in Finland, Sweden and Norway they highlighted the churches’ contributions to social capital (obligations of reciprocity, flow of information within social ties and norms), both in the churches’ roles as service providers and of a critical voice (Pessi et al., p. 213). Despite a decline in regular religious practices and beliefs in traditional terms, the Nordic majority churches studied “have implicitly been assigned a role as value guardians in the welfare state” (Pessi et al., p. 228).

As the number of asylum claimants rose during 2015 and 2016, the Church of Sweden had the advantage of having personnel and facilities across the entire country, in urban as well as rural areas. Since the great number of asylum seekers were geographically distributed, the church had an “infrastructure” to aid their reception. This is shown in a survey study, performed by the Church of Sweden in October 2016, which focused on the activities over the year before relating to the reception of asylum seekers (Hellqvist & Sandberg, 2017).

From late 2015 to late 2016, 80% of the country’s parishes were engaged in activities relating to asylum seekers (Hellqvist & Sandberg, 2017). These activities consisted of a broad range of cooperative efforts with local communities, such as language cafes, distribution of clothing, and assistance with refugee-government communication. Many volunteered in these efforts.

### 4. Church in Transformation

The Swedish majority church is described by sociologists of religion as having a “double role” in society. The Church of Sweden is defined by both its historical relation to the state and its contemporary position as a faith-based community (and thus a part of civil society):

In the former relationship the majority churches fill a welfare function by engendering feelings of unity and trust. This is done by giving rites a content and by legitimizing values of human dignity and solidarity. (Bäckström, 2014, p. 107)

Welfare state  $\Rightarrow$  Welfare pluralism  
State church  $\Rightarrow$  Actor in civil society

**Figure 1.** Trajectory over the last five decades de-regulation of welfare state and state church.

Bäckström (2014, p. 107) sees this function as a part of a “larger cultural structure of trust”. For actors in civil society, plurality and exceptionality are key values (Wijkström & Einarsson, 2006). Here, majority churches fulfil welfare functions by being active voices in civil society, in parallel with adopting the role of performers of social care (Bäckström, 2014, p. 117; see Table 1). Then plurality can be understood as an ideal of the welfare market and exceptionality the unique character of each civil society organization.

Naturally this double role generates tensions. How “outspoken” (voice)—and on what issues—can a church with almost 6 million members be, without risking its function to promote social coherence?

#### 4.1. Civil Society, Churches and Asylum Seekers

The organizations of civil society can have an important role, not only in the immediate reception of asylum seekers, but also in a future capacity. Studies indicate that immigrants have gained agency and voice in the public arena through a web of civil society interactions (Schmidtke, 2018; Weinryb & Turunen, 2017). When it comes to churches specifically, studies indicate different approaches to societal problems, and that these approaches can be modified in the context of parishes interacting with their social situation.

In a Swedish case study of different faith-based communities of different denominations, both Christian and Islamic, Lundgren (2018) discusses the different roles that can be seen in relation to the reception of asylum seekers. She characterizes them into three ideal types:

- Emergency responder
- Community-based Continuer
- Spiritual Integrators

The first ideal type is described as a primarily socially determined role where actors respond to an immediate situation. Religious and non-religious actors in civil society both respond in a similar manner and the social interventions are generally separated from religious practices. Volunteers, not just those belonging to a particular faith-based community, are engaged in the work. There is a positive attitude towards cooperation with other actors of civil society and the state.

The second ideal type integrates religion into activities relating to asylum seekers, such as by inviting them to service and prayer. Parishes engage their members as volunteers and cooperate with other faith-based communities with similar backgrounds. The religious values held

by parishes are seen as distinct from those of society at large, and parishes actively participate in debates about these values.

The third ideal type describes parishes that are less engaged in immediate situations. Rather than organize interventions of their own, parishes encourage members to perform good deeds more generally.

Other studies also note different approaches to increased social needs and problems (Wineburg, 1994). Parish members can engage in social issues outside of their role as parish members. However, parishes and their members can also be affected by their social context, i.e., by being moved by encountering fellow human beings in need. Wineburg (1994, p. 167) describes this as a “move from a civic mission orientation to a more activist mission orientation”.

## 5. Method

To further explore and discuss which role local churches play in relation to the welfare society, as actors in civil society, and in relation to their own mission we now turn to a particular case. During 2016 a theological action research project was conducted in the parish of Mölndal together with representatives of the Church of Sweden. The purpose of the project was to learn and generate theological knowledge based on the experiences of the process connected to the transit home and the collaboration with the local municipality. Action research was chosen as an approach since it, in a very concrete way, involves local practitioners and their experiences and knowledge in the research process. The results from the project show that this participative aspect was a fruitful way of generating thick and nuanced accounts of church as a welfare actor.

The term “action research” covers a wide range of methodologies. One common feature is the participatory approach and use of conversational methods. Another feature is the aim that the research should contribute to some sort of change or solve some problem (Reason & Bradbury, 2008, p. 1). The participatory research approach involves local practitioners in the research process from, initially, formulating research questions to interpretation and analysis. As in other examples of theological action research (Cameron, 2010) focus in this particular project was on generating theological reflections and knowledge through a common and participative research process.

Action research brings questions of researcher reflexivity to the centre of attention. External researchers need to be aware of their role. Even if important parts of the

**Table 1.** Double roles of the Church of Sweden.

	<b>Former State Church</b>	<b>Autonomous Faith Community</b>
Character	Cultural structure of trust: by rituals and legitimizing values	Civil society actor: by voice and service
Welfare function	Unity and social coherence	Plurality and exceptionality

process are performed together with local representatives, the external researchers have influence over and responsibility for the process. In this particular project the external researchers were clear from the beginning on their aim of generating novel theological reflection on the church as welfare agent. This broader aim was introduced to the parish research group and integrated into a process of generating common research questions for the project. The whole process was shaped by a transparent and reflexive attitude towards the different voices that appear in the process and conversations (Idestrom & Kaufman, 2017). In this article we, the external researchers, use the results from the common project as a point of departure for raising questions that move beyond the action research project itself.

### 5.1. The Parish Research Group

The hub of the research project consisted of meetings with a parish research group, which was created at the start of the project. Initially the external researchers established contact with the local vicar. The participants in the parish research group were then selected in cooperation with the vicar. The aim was that the participants should represent the different parts of the parish, as well as various roles: deacon, priest, youth leader, as well as a representative from the parish assembly. These participants in the parish research group are important voices in the project. Together with the external researchers, who also have had a voice in the conversation, they have been engaged in the analysis and interpretation of the empirical material gathered. Some have also been interviewed by the external researchers, and these interviews have been a part of the analysed and interpreted material. A third category and voice in the project are other representatives of the parish, who have also been interviewed. A last category, and voice, consists of other informants, such as employees of the local authority.

The aim of the project was, as already mentioned, to contribute to processes of learning and generation of theological knowledge, and thereby, change in the parish of Mölndal.

### 5.2. Ways of Generating Data

During the action research project, the external researchers performed around twenty semi-structured interviews with deacons, priests, parish educators, volunteers, administrative personnel, the head of the municipality and two workers in the municipal refugee office. The external researchers also met the parish council, as well as performed observations at the Swedish Migration Agency. The parish research group met continually during the research period, five days in total, and discussed and reflected upon the generated data. The results from the project were finally presented in a report co-written with the parish research group.

## 6. Mölndal Parish 2015–2016

The parish of Mölndal had recently been reorganized with a new vicar. A new vision document describing the identity and goals of the parish had been created and adopted. The new document specified that the Church of Sweden in Mölndal should be “a committed, present and brave church”. These ideals were exemplified by a commitment to the equal value of every person and to provide for those in need. Refugees are mentioned explicitly. In describing what it meant to be a “present” church, the document mentioned such things as listening to people’s fears and conveying the hope of Christian faith in words and/or deeds. Another aspect of “presence” was the ambition to work with the municipality and other actors with good intentions to create an open and tolerant society.

The municipality of Mölndal had, in the national organisation of refugee reception, a particular responsibility to take care of unaccompanied minors. Municipal administrators worked hard to find accommodation for the large numbers of people in this category that had arrived. On the 28th of August 2015, the vicar received a call. A manager at the local authority responsible for work with unaccompanied minor refugees asked if the church could help find accommodation for these children. The vicar was positive and promised to investigate what could be done. The parish assembly were unanimous in expressing their support for this decision: “We were addressed as church. Saying no was simply out of the question”, commented the vicar.

The result of this phone call from the municipal administrator was the opening of a transit accommodation unit, organized and staffed by the local authority, in facilities owned by the church. It was the first destination for many unaccompanied minors, who were then relocated to other municipalities around the country. The accommodation in the church was in use periodically during the autumn of 2015, and closed when the border controls reduced the number of refugees.

### 6.1. A question of Values

The local authority administrator interviewed says she wanted to see the church as an actor in these matters, due to the church’s values, in a time when public opinion about receiving refugees was characterized by turbulence and conflict. The administrator sees the church as an actor that can push “these basic values” in a different way than she could in her capacity as a local authority official. During the interview, it is revealed that an important reason that the administrator contacted the church specifically was that she had made the assessment that no one would question the church’s engagement in refugee issues. Both the administrator and the vicar confirm that the decision to open transit accommodation was received with very little resistance. There was, however, strong opposition to opening transit accommo-



dation in the gymnasium of a school merely hundreds of meters away from the parish facilities.

The administrator's attitude towards the church as religious actor appears to be pragmatic: "We need to use each other's capacities. The goal is that each child will be taken care of". She concludes that the church, by virtue of its religious identity, is an important actor in the municipality. Newly arrived refugees have a relationship to religion that those who have grown up in Sweden seldom have. This is, according to the administrator, something that everyone who works with integration and migration needs to understand.

The boys who lived in the transit accommodation temporarily were Muslims and prayed on the church premises. One of the municipal employees managing the facility was also a Muslim. In another part of the building, Christian carols were practiced. This means that Christian and Muslim practices occurred parallel in different rooms of the same building. A local authority official present remarked upon this in positive terms: "This sure is quite something, and it's something to be proud of".

The administrator emphasises that the municipality is supposed to treat all religious traditions equally. The decision to work together with the church was based on the assessment that the organisational resources possessed by the parish made it possible to get things done. In principle, she would have made the same decision if it were a mosque, everything else being equal. She describes it in terms of the municipality not being neutral to religion, since issues of religion are important issues, but rather to try to defuse tensions around religious issues.

### *6.2. Gifts, Volunteer Engagement and Powerlessness*

As mentioned, the question of refugees on their way through Europe was an every-day issue in public media. The newspaper wrote: "Here is how you can help in the refugee crisis". The vicar was interviewed in the media. People asked what could be done. Thus, the church took it upon itself to organize the collection of clothes. The people responded en masse. Soon, a thousand boxes of clothing had to be stored, handled, sorted and distributed. Volunteers joined up. "Really, it all began with us collecting some clothes for those kids in the transit accommodation. And then suddenly we had a whole lot of clothes", said the priest in charge and sighed.

Eventually, the responsibility for the logistics of distributing the clothes could be transferred to the facilities of the Swedish Migration Agency. The distribution took place twice a week from a container. A volunteer describes: "As a member of a church choir, I could [turn to my choir peers and] say, 'Now we need men's underwear, now we need tights or winter jackets'".

However, the premises of the Migration Agency were well known to the parish staff even before the clothes distribution started. On the premises there is also a detention centre, a locked facility harbouring those who are

about to be deported. For a number of years the parish deacon has coordinated the efforts of the Red Cross and the churches visiting the centre. Before the visit each week, the officer on duty at the detention centre expects the deacon to send a list of the visitors' names to the authority. The visitors do not have the possibility to act on individual cases in a legal capacity. Interviewed volunteers say that they sometimes nevertheless manage to connect, for example through stories of someone's background or home country, or through shared expressions of faith. Despite these moments of connection, one of the volunteers refers to these visits as an "exercise in powerlessness". Nevertheless, the volunteers continue to go there. They feel the visits are a meaningful act, and can tell of past meetings that held significance.

### *6.3. Activism and Community Engagement*

In this study, it becomes clear that the Church of Sweden in Mölndal had been engaged in issues of migration even before 2015. The visits described above are an example of that. Another is the initiative to provide lodging to beggars from other EU countries. The aim was not that the churches would solve their housing situation, but to draw attention to their plight. The initiative gained media attention. Moreover, something happened in the internal discussion about and understanding of the parish's mission during 2015. During the conversations that were initiated by the research project, a picture emerged of how the challenge from the external world, in the form of the local authority asking for assistance, generated knowledge and energy for both the churches social work and confession. One example is the preparation for Advent 2015, the vicar discussed with her priests the possibilities the biblical texts opened up to preach tolerance and generosity. During the analysis process, the parish research group highlighted the importance of the challenges faced during this period. Church employees related how meaningful and significant it felt to be a part of the sorting and distribution of clothes. An employee working with children told of how it made it possible to convey how the relationship to God manifests in relations to other people, and in doing good deeds. Together with the children, she sorted clothes and showed in action what it means to care for one's neighbour. It became clear that the needs of the refugees were present "here and now", and not off in some vague distance. The efforts thus became a confirmation that the parish was headed in the right direction. It confirmed that one's belief was "solid" and engendered engagement:

If we can do something, well, why shouldn't we do something, I thought. We can't just sit here twiddling our thumbs. I felt ready to fight!

This engagement was not limited to the church. A local authority employee when interviewed reflected over what had transpired: "People acting together is a tremen-

dous force". Asking for help opened up the space for co-operation. The experiences that laid the groundwork for the feelings of engagement and significance are in other words not limited to the church alone, but touched a large portion of society during the autumn of 2015.

#### *6.4. Shared Responsibility and Dialogue*

One of the insights that crystallised during the research process regards the leadership role of the vicar: "My role is in many ways to create networks". This autumn she had learned a lot about the municipal organization. Now she was seeking to get in touch with those responsible for planning public health initiatives in order to learn more about human vulnerability in the different parts of the municipality/parish. The church has also been present when different actors of civil society have been invited to meet with the county authority. In Mölndal, there is no mosque, but there is a prayer room for Muslims. The vicar relays how she had heard that it was difficult to get in touch with the representatives of the Muslim group. The vicar decided to go and see them:

I told them that we need to know about one another. We are at the same place. They were clearly scared. There are no signs. They have a web site but no address....I wanted them to know that we are their friends and that we want people to be able to practice religion.

Even if the church and the prayer room have different religious traditions, the vicar emphasized that they do share the responsibility for the local community, Mölndal. There live the people who pray, albeit within different rooms and traditions.

The vicar also initiated a survey of the local community to find answers to the question of what needs to be done to encourage long-term integration. This led to a youth priest and a group of girls starting to visit a local authority accommodation centre for unaccompanied minors.

When it comes to the relationship with government institutions, the vicar maintains that it comes down to being on "speaking terms". She worries about the polarization of different opinions in society. There is a need to meet "eye to eye in such a way that we at least can negotiate about the shared reality we find ourselves in". She maintains that the church has a role in encouraging dialogue.

### **7. Analysis**

In a time of deregulation and increased expectations on civil society, this study describes a local context when the welfare state was increasingly strained. In the national debate and in social media, worry and rumours of a "system breakdown" flourished (Scarpa & Schierup, 2018). This case study shows that this did not happen in

Mölndal. The institutions of public welfare were strained, but managed to pull through the immediate situation. The specific question we will analyse is how a local church appears in relation to the welfare society, civil society and its own mission.

#### *7.1. Church as Welfare State Supporter*

In the Church of Sweden, there are theological underpinnings (the Lutheran two-realm doctrine) for a tradition of supporting a responsibility-taking welfare state. The transit accommodation created in support of the local authority's welfare work can be seen as a classic role for the church in the welfare state, giving support, as a complement. By the local authority official, it is also seen as a value guardian. In this case the local Church answers to the governmental demand cited above (SOU, 1997) of solving social problems with ethical awareness. We also note that, in the case of Mölndal, the church did not enter into a commercial relation regarding the transit accommodation, and thus did not conform to the praxis of the welfare market. The vicar saw it as a given not to charge the municipality, as the church is already financed through its membership dues.

#### *7.2. Church as Civil Society Activist*

Since the year 2000 the Church of Sweden is part of civil society. In an immediate situation of social anxiety, there is a need to guide people's engagement. This is a classic role for a philanthropic humanitarian organization to adopt in order to channel voluntary engagement for "the other". Here, the church adopted the task of gathering and distributing clothes to refugees. This "activism" in the parish appears, after the researchers have broadened their observations through interviews and conversations, not be an isolated effort. Engagement in issues of migration had previously been manifested in the project of housing EU-migrants. This, too, is an example of a "classic" intervention from civil society—to draw attention through direct action to societal problems in need of being addressed. Another continual humanitarian intervention was noted during the course of the research project: the regular visits to the detention centre together with other organisations from civil society.

The character of these interventions can be likened to what Lundgren (2018) called "emergency responder", a primarily socially determined role which responds to an immediate situation. The social interventions are primarily separated from religious practices, albeit without necessarily excluding religious actions or motivations. Volunteers, not just those belonging to a particular faith-based community, are engaged in the work. There is a positive attitude towards cooperation with other actors of civil society and the state. Nevertheless, these actions are seen as important expressions of faith, by representatives of the local parish.

### 7.3. Church with an Activated Mission

In this case study, we see that the parish in its identity and mission has been activated both by internal processes and external proposals. The presence of refugees, in persona, spurs the parish into action (Wineburg, 1994). On an institutional level, the representatives of the church could take a stand for values in a manner that government officials could not. It can therefore be said that the church, according to the local authority administrator, possesses significant attributes and resources which in a crucial way could contribute to the municipality being enabled to fulfil its responsibility for social care. The municipal administrator neither asks nor expects the church to act in any other way than it would according to its Christian tradition and established practice.

The action research design within the local church allows us to describe how the events in late 2015 were significant for the internal interpretation of the mission of the parish. A policy document was discussed and accepted in the same year. Refugees were explicitly mentioned as a group in need. When the request from the municipality arrived, the vicar with her staff and the parish board had a mental readiness to take responsibility. The vicar and her co-workers saw something that confirmed and renewed the church's calling and mission. This includes, among other things, to adopt a proactive role when it comes to creating and maintaining new relations to the local community.

### 8. Conclusion

When local parishes orient themselves towards new roles in the domains of civil society, they can choose or reject adopting a role as a provider of care on a welfare market. Rather, this case study shows an alliance between the local public welfare and the local church. The study shows that relations based on joint efforts were strengthened through being applied. The parish of Mölndal proclaims to prefer meeting representatives of government institutions and other faith-based organisations "eye to eye", through means of dialogue. These efforts are underlined by the public perception of the church as a legitimate partner. Even though the church does not have the unifying role it had previously, it still acts based on a sense of responsibility for the wider local community. The interaction gave the actors involved new insights about the local societal actors, which can, in the future probably strengthen the conditions for cooperation and social coherence in the local community.

The incident (the transit accommodation question) actualised both the function of social coherence and of something exceptional. It is important to remember that there was a clear expectation on the part of the municipality that the church acted based on its core values, which in a significant way are shaped by Christian tradition and faith. The core values, in combination with the trust for the parish expressed by the head of the local mu-

nicipality, creates fertile soil for collaboration. Both the vicar and the municipal administrator see the shared responsibility in a precarious situation as self-evident. This "welfare state supporting role" of the local church is here integrated with an activism common to actors in civil society, e.g., when the parish coordinates voluntary efforts.

The double roles of the former state church and the autonomous faith community, naturally generates certain tensions, but at the same time, as our analysis demonstrates, extend the discretion of the parish. This case study, then, suggests that this new position challenges the church to re-imagine its own mission.

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### Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interests.

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